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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)  
SUBJECT: SOCIAL DEMOCRATS SEEK INCREASED ECONOMIC  
COOPERATION WITH UNITED STATES

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary  
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¶1. (C) Ismail Boulahia, Secretary General of the Social Democratic Movement (MDS) and MDS political bureau member Taieb Mohsni, discussed the prospects for economic cooperation with the Ambassador on October 7. Boulahia explained his party's support of the ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) and President Ben Ali's candidacy in 2009. The party is allowed to maintain regional offices and is lobbying to be allowed to form a parliamentary group. Touching on the unemployment protests in the southwestern mining town of Gafsa, Boulahia said the GOT needed to focus more on poorer regions. End Summary.

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Hand in Hand with the RCD  
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¶2. (C) During his October 7 meeting with the Ambassador, Social Democratic Movement (MDS) Secretary General Ismail Boulahia explained that the MDS has always endorsed President Ben Ali during elections. The largest opposition party in the Chamber of Deputies, with 14 seats, the MDS is more "tolerated" than other parties, Boulahia acknowledged. He attributed this to the fact that the MDS is also one of the oldest opposition parties, and has shunned even moderate Islamists.

¶3. (C) Calling the MDS the RCD's "First Partner," Boulahia said that Tunisia's best hope for progress was through solidarity and support of the President's proposed initiatives. He did note, however, that the MDS wishes to form its own group within parliament and hopes to persuade the RCD to agree. The Chamber of Deputies' current rules dictate that a minimum of 10 percent of members (18 of 189) are needed to form a parliamentary group. With only 14, the MDS is unable to found a group on its own. Boulahia said that President Ben Ali had agreed to lower the percentage to 7 percent, but the change has yet to be enacted.

¶4. (C) The MDS has been able to open and maintain offices in all regions of Tunisia, including the southwestern mining town of Gafsa where several unemployment protests took place between January and June. Boulahia opined that a lack of development in the region had spurred the protests, and indicated that the GOT should do more to focus its development efforts in impoverished areas such as Gafsa. He added that steps need to be taken to involve youth, especially women, in politics. Boulahia reminisced that when he was young, he attended many kinds of political debates while a university student. Today, he said, the government's fear of extremists makes it impossible for any group to hold

such gatherings.

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More Bilateral Economic Cooperation Needed  
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¶5. (C) Boulahia emphasized that his party was interested supporting joint economic development initiatives as well as participating in USG-sponsored exchange and English language training programs. The Ambassador replied that he would supply Boulahia with information on Embassy-supported English language training programs held through the NGO AMIDEAST. He also explained that though Economic Support Funds (ESF), the Embassy will be funding several relevant programs. In response to Boulahia's request for English-language books, the Ambassador offered to see what resources the Embassy could donate. He added that he was open to exploring exchange-program possibilities.

¶6. (C) In the context of their discussion about Tunisia's quest for increased economic development, Boulahia asked the Ambassador for his assessment of Tunisia's economic climate. The Ambassador responded that the United States had a number of ideas on how to promote greater domestic and international investment, and offered to share a list with the MDS. Among those items he explained, was the implementation of a law allowing franchising and initiatives to encourage a transparent banking sector. He added that steps could be taken to improve the profitability of the tourism sector, which currently targets package tour clientele, to attract more high-end tourists.

¶7. (C) After Boulahaia expressed an interest in a sister-state partnership with the United States, the Ambassador mentioned that Tunisia already has a state partnership program with the state of Wyoming. He explained that the partnership already included economic and military cooperation aspects, but he would be happy to explore any ideas the MDS might have to enhance the initiative.

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Comment  
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¶8. (C) As can be expected with a representative from a party close to the RCD, Boulahia did not stray far from GOT talking points and mostly glossed over questions of increased freedom of expression and freedom of association. We welcome the MDS's expressed interest in participating in our projects and will work to include members in future exchange programs.

End Comment.

GODEC